How did Hélio Gracie develop such a profound, unorthodox style? As a child, he suffered medical complications and was advised to stay away from strenuous physical activity because he was small, weak, and sickly. Gracie eventually learned Japanese judo through observation, but discovered that most moves require great strength and explosiveness to execute, qualities he lacked. Instead of conceding failure, he ingeniously bypassed the restrictions by creating his own style. Aware of his physical shortcomings, he focused on ground-fighting and created moves that eradicated an opponent's size advantage. By taking the fight to the ground, Gracie could negate a larger opponent's superior reach and powerful strikes. As Bottenburg and Heilbron write, Hélio Gracie created Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) “not as a sport but as the most effective form of self-defense” (2006:270). He abandoned the emphasis on fine motor movements in favor of leverage and gross-motor movements (Downey 2007). This transition from honorable stand-up fighting to “dirty, street-fighting” was born not out of pure malice, but necessity for an equalizer. How did Hélio Gracie adapt techniques from Masahiko Kimura’s judo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) foundering principles contrast strikingly with that of traditional judo. Unlike Gracie’s defense-oriented BJJ, raw competition pervades judo’s core; the style emphasizes brink, powerful throws to the ground, immobilization, and forced submission (Nishime). Judo’s philosophy of straightforward, overwhelming force as the true path to victory can be seen more clearly in its throwing element, as these moves require great strength and skillfulness to execute. Masahiko Kimura exemplified this brute style; at the height of his career he would practice leg throws against a tree, perform a thousand pushups, and cause up to ten concussions in sparring matches daily (Chen). Judo, however, teeters between brutal violence. Standing in Brazilians’ way of social progress are systems incapable of being thrown, punched, or blasted aside; after all, social prejudice is “embedded in everyday interactions,” difficult to isolate, and thus challenging to protest (Goldstein 1999:564). If they were to apply judo’s philosophy and violently protest, they could face imprisonment and even death. What makes BJJ culturally rich, on the other hand, is how reliable and applicable it is to the everyday lives of suffering Brazilians.

Hélio Gracie’s Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) faced the ultimate test against Masahiko Kimura: could Gracie have created a style surpassing the original? Kimura boasted before the fight that Gracie should consider it a victory if he lasted even three minutes; he outweighed him by over fifty pounds and was more than ten years younger. As the fight began, Kimura began throwing Gracie, but Gracie used the art of falling gracefully to “break the throws with little injury” (Kimura). He frustrated Kimura for thirteen minutes before Kimura applied a shoulder lock (that today bears his surname) and broke Gracie’s arm. Though Gracie refused to submit, his corner threw in the towel to spare him further injury. Even in defeat, Gracie earned Kimura’s lasting respect for both himself and BJJ. “Kimura later applauded Gracie’s tremendous will to win and invited him to teach at the National Academy of Judo of Japan (Chen).” Gracie’s tenacity personified his style, by enduring the shoulder lock. Gracie stayed true to his philosophy of empowering the weak. His determination earned him a “moral victory” and made him a national hero, because underprivileged Brazilians could see themselves in the underdog Hélio Gracie.

Gracie’s son Rorion later moved to the United States and founded the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which is now one of the world’s largest MMA promotion companies. His younger brother Royce Gracie dominated the first four UFC tournaments and still holds the record for submission victories (Downey 2007:202). In the past decade, though, MMA has changed dramatically. Recently, Royce Gracie came out of retirement to fight welterweight champion Matt Hughes and was thoroughly dominated by Hughes’ ground and pound, a hybrid style that emerged from cross training, ironically, those seeking greater efficacy developed this style by combining elements of other styles. Thus, this creative destruction, they had captivated the style’s fan base. Battles no longer depended on winning or losing in a deep cultural clash, as fighters now seek a bloodbath victory. Will BJJ fight through and retain its distinct brasilidade and Brazilianness, or submit to the culturally deleterious vacuum of modern MMA? Only time will tell.